

Committee on Resources,

Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, & Public Lands

[parks](#) - - Rep. Joel Hefley, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6207 - - (202) 226-7736

Witness Statement

TESTIMONY
of
SUSAN D. MERROW
before the Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, and Public Lands
concerning
H.R. 182 - LEGISLATION TO AMEND THE WILD AND SCENIC RIVERS ACT
TO DESIGNATE THE EIGHTMILE RIVER FOR STUDY
March 13, 2001

My name is Susan Merrow. I am currently serving my fifth term as First Selectman of the Town of East Haddam, Connecticut, about 30 miles southeast of Hartford. For those unfamiliar with old-fashioned New England small town government, the First Selectman is the Chief Elected Official, and in many towns like mine, also the Chief Executive Officer. I know that Connecticut is commonly regarded as a bedroom community for New York City. It comes as a surprise to many I meet from other parts of the country that eastern Connecticut is a remarkable swath of green and surprisingly open, rural land between Boston and Washington. On behalf of the people of my town, I come before you today to urge your favorable consideration for H.R. 182, a bill which would amend the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act to include a study of the Eightmile River, a waterway which we believe to of exemplary significance to my town, our region, and our state.

East Haddam itself is a town of 7620 people and 57 square miles, bordered by the magnificent Connecticut River. We have many things of which to be proud in East Haddam. We are home to the Goodspeed Opera House, a restored Victorian Theater that sent such well known musicals to Broadway as "Annie" and "Man of La Mancha." We are proud to be the home of U. S. Senator Christopher Dodd. We have venerable old homes and farms, and a proud history of nineteenth century water-powered mills. We have two handsome state parks. One of these, which is called Gillette's Castle, draws thousands of visitors from all over the world to view the unusual stone mansion of actor William Gillette, made famous by his portrayal of Sherlock Holmes, and to gaze down upon the Tidelands of the Connecticut River as they stretch away to the south, toward Long Island Sound. These Tidelands have been identified under the Ramsar Treaty as "wetlands of international significance." We have three handsome lakes, large stretches of unfragmented forests, and fishable, swimmable streams. Like any community, we balance these cultural and environmental resources against all the demands of a modern community – the need for a healthy economy, for jobs, for decent housing, for funding to build schools. Yet, over and over again, when asked to help town planners strike a balance between stewardship and development of our natural resources, the people of my town speak out clearly for preserving and protecting the natural environment. We do this not just for reasons of nostalgia, but because we see it in our long term economic best interest. We believe that our tourism dependent economy and what we count as crucial to the quality of life that make East Haddam a good place to live require that we do no less. We have embarked on a several year planning process that has at its heart the notion that our environment and our economy are inextricably linked. We are actively planning as a

community for environmentally compatible economic development, development which acknowledges and enhances the unique natural and cultural attributes of our town. Our planning process began with involving our whole citizenry in establishing a list of community values – things we hold dear as a town such as our history, our education system, our tradition of volunteerism, and our love of the arts – and protecting the natural environment is prominent among them. We have agreed as a community to take these values into account as we weigh plans for future direction and development.

All of this is by way of backdrop for my request of you that you give favorable consideration to our wish that you support funding for the study of East Haddam's most remarkable natural resource, the Eightmile River, for possible inclusion in the Wild and Scenic River system. The main stem of the Eightmile River rises in East Haddam and flows through hemlock gorges, over a spectacular waterfall, alongside forests, fields, and farms as it finds its way to the Connecticut River. The Eightmile River watershed encompasses about a third of the land area of East Haddam. Through a combination of serendipity and the fortunate foresight of our town forefathers, the Eightmile River flows unrestricted and pure through an almost completely untrammelled landscape, a remarkable greenway. While significant stretches of the watershed are permanently protected from development by the State and by land trusts, most of the watershed is in the hands of private landowners. The people of East Haddam have teamed up with people from the other two towns in the watershed to educate themselves and others about this resource. Our theory is that, if people know the resource they will respect it, and if they respect it they will make good decisions about it. Toward this end, working with our state university and The Nature Conservancy, we have amassed a large data base of information about this river – the forest resources of the watershed, the development patterns, its water quality and more. We have learned that our river is essentially free-flowing, has high water quality, excellent riparian habitat, extensive fresh water wetlands and submerged aquatic vegetation, healthy populations of fresh water mussels and native and stocked trout, and it supports a high diversity of fish species and healthy runs of migratory fish. On behalf of my townspeople, I have joined the First Selectmen of the other two towns in the watershed in creating an agreement to work together to protect this resource. I and my fellow First Selectmen from Lyme and Salem signed a compact which states in part,

"...the Towns of East Haddam, Lyme and Salem enter into this voluntary Conservation compact that acknowledges our commitment to balance conservation and growth by:

1. Protecting and enhancing the water resources of the watershed, including both the quality of the water and the integrity of normal stream and groundwater flows;
2. Connecting and maintaining habitats and rural landscapes throughout the watershed, and ;
3. Ensuring the long-term social, economic, environmental health and vitality of the communities in the watershed.

I carry with me today the wishes and hopes of my colleagues in the other two towns and their constituents. Those of you who have labored long in the fields of government will recognize how difficult it can be to make agreements that span political boundaries. "Home Rule" is practically carved into the seal of each of Connecticut's 169 municipalities. Any agreement that suggests putting the interests of a region first is commonly regarded with suspicion. In the case of this compact to protect the Eightmile River, our citizens readily grasped the notion that since rivers do not conform to political boundaries, neither can we think only of our short term self-interest if we care about this river. Support for studying the Eightmile River for possible inclusion in the Wild and Scenic River program is broad and deep in all three watershed towns. From Boards of Selectmen, to Planning and Zoning Commissions, to Wetlands Commissions, to Land

Trusts – even to Economic Development Commissions and even the Historic District Commission in one town, our towns speak with one voice about how strongly we feel that this is a very unusual and valuable resource, worthy to be listed alongside the great rivers of our country. My community and the others in the Eightmile watershed stand ready to do the work required to support a study and to make use of the information that will be developed. Please consider these thoughts and wishes as you weigh the merits of H.R. 182. Please help us to gain deserved recognition for this very special bit of unspoiled nature that graces my town and that we deeply hope will do so for generations to come.

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